DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 136 111 CG 011 138

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TITLE Anatomy, Destiny, and Predestination: Women and the Loss of Control.
PUB DATE Sep 76
NOTE 5p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (84th, Washington, D.C., September 3-7, 1976) Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Androgyny; *Females; Personality Theories; Psychological Needs; *Role Theory; *Self Actualization; *Sexuality; *Socialization; Speeches

ABSTRACT

Stereotyped views of active masculinity and passive femininity have recently come under increasingly critical scrutiny. From the abstract to the practical, the authors see a growth of efforts toward equality of social opportunity regardless of biological differences. The central thesis of the paper is that women are repeatedly subject to experiences which entail loss of control which serves not only to explain the stereotyped view of passive femininity but also to guide our understanding of personality development, sex roles and current social controversy concerning females' need for personal identity. (Author/SBP)

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ANATOMY, DESTINY, AND PREDESTINATION: WOMEN AND THE LOSS OF CONTROL[1]

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The stereotyped views of active masculinity and passive femininity have recently come under increasingly critical scrutiny. Progress toward the elimination of potential bias against women has ranged, for example, from Affirmative Action Committees governing hiring practices to the American Psychological Association instruction to avoid "sexist" language in papers reporting research: in short, from the abstract to the practical, we see a growth of efforts toward equality of social opportunity regardless of biological differences.

The present paper is addressed to a particular moment in history, 1976, while the role stereotypes of active masculinity and passive femininity still retain elements of validity. Our point of departure is the interface between the human organism and the social institutions which govern the expression of its needs; our central thesis is that women are repeatedly subject to experiences which entail the loss of control, and that this theme, the loss of control, will serve not only to explain the stereotyped view of passive femininity but also to guide our understanding of personality development, sex roles, and current social controversies over such issues as a married woman's right to retain her own name and legislation on abortion--in short, issues which range from the question of personal identity to matters of life and death.

Recognition of the social consequences of the anatomical differences between the sexes is at least as old as the first legislation on marriage, a peculiarly human institution intended to serve, since our instincts do not, to protect the female rendered vulnerable by pregnancy and childbearing. The first major statement on the psychological consequences of the anatomical differences between women and men is some thousands of years more recent: it is Freud's effort to explore the effects on development of growing up with a potentially bisexual disposition in a body whose sexuality must find expression within the limits imposed by the anatomy of one sex or the other, and the accompanying social restrictions on men, women, and sexuality (1933; 1962).

As most developmental theorists do, we shall give our attention to personality at the interface between the organism and society, and begin by asking what the consequences might be of inhabiting a female body or a male body. Freud's injunction against identifying activity with masculinity, passivity with femininity (". . .I advise you against it. It seems to me to serve no useful purpose and adds nothing to our knowledge," 1933, p. 115) is illuminated if we consider the sex act: while in the ideal case the erect male flesh enters the receptive female flesh--and thus sexual intercourse can occur without female arousal, but not without male arousal--it is also true that each act of sex is an occasion for possible failure for a man. Erectile potency is not under voluntary control, and thus a man may experience loss of control in the intimacy of his sexual behavior just as women more obviously experience loss of control as their bodies go on about the species business of menstruation, pregnancy, and birth.

[1]Paper to be presented to the American Psychological Association, Washington, D.C., September 1976.

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We propose that the extent and nature of the loss of control--rather than activity and passivity--is the dimension on which sex differences and their consequences for personality development and social roles must be viewed. It is our contention that changing views on the roles of women and men, current legal controversy dealing with such issues as equal rights in employment and marriage, and the more heated debates over the rights of women as opposed to the rights of the unborn child, can all be understood as manifestations of the interaction between the organism and its social context. While the loss of personal control is experienced by males and females alike as they move through the long childhood of humanity toward their maturity, the "fateful" discovery made by women is not that their bodies lack a penis (Erikson, 1963) but that their bodies serve not only their individual selves but the species as well--a discovery which is equally fateful for men (Datan, 1975b).

From birth onward, the socialization of girls and boys is different (Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974), and is directed toward the destiny implicit in the anatomical differences: that is to say, toward the possibility if not the promise of motherhood and fatherhood. Erikson (1964) has argued that a sense of body boundaries, of inner and outer space, shapes even the play of pregenital children: thus the play arena of the little girl is the family room, that of the little boy the launching pad for rockets.

External determinants of sex roles are not lacking, however: differential treatment of boys and girls can be observed in early infancy, and has even been shown to be independent of the actual sex of the baby. In exploratory experimental research using a single male infant dressed as either a boy or a girl, the women who were subjects in the study were observed to behave differently with the baby, along lines reflecting stereotyped expectations about "sweet" girls and "active" boys, according to whether they had been told by the experimenter that the infant was female or male--and notwithstanding their assertions, during a debriefing interview, that boys and girls should be treated alike (Will, Self, and Datan, 1976).

Thus biology and cultural history converge to produce patterns of socialization which tend to transmit, from generation to generation, the "traditional" psychological differences between the sexes: most research has shown little boys to be more assertive and more aggressive, little girls to be more sociable, docile, and nurturant (Block, 1973; Chesler and Coll, 1973; Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974). These personality differences may be stated more simply: our social values tend to endorse the little boy who takes what he wants from the world and from others, so long as he is not a brute; a comparable endorsement goes to the little girl who learns to negotiate a compromise--and there is no harm done if she gives in gracefully. These values translate easily enough into questions of personal control: boys more often learn to take control, girls more often learn to yield it up.

With the transition to maturity, personality and sex role differences come to correspond to the innate differences in adult sexuality. Extinction waits for human societies which fail to recognize the genuinely "fateful" distinction between the sexes: that is, not the presence or absence of a penis, but the presence or absence of the capacity to bear children. At the core of this difference we can see the sex-linked differential degree of personal control at its most profound. The relative degrees of activity or passivity in women and men during the act of sex, or in traditional social roles, can be dismissed as trivial. A man does not die of impotence, but a woman may die in childbirth. Over the centuries of human history, recognition of this truly fateful distinction has progressed from pre-Mosaic fertility worship and subsequent transformations in religious ritual (Datan, 1975a) to present obstetrical techniques, which minimize the risk of maternal

mortality. When a women dies in childbirth today, it is not expectable but a shock--not, however, to be compared to the shock if a man were to die from the stress f his wife's pregnancy and childbirth.

Erickson (1963) has suggested that our various social institutions grow out of the needs emerging at the various developmental stages of the life cycle: thus faith and religion can be traced to the earliest stage in ego development, basic trust; the second stage, autonomy, finds expression in the institutions which shape and enforce law. The seventh stage, however--generativity, the stage reflecting parenthood and other manifestations of care for the next generation--is unique. Erikson observes that all social institutions sanction the manifestations of generativity. A brief consideration of the position of the family in religion and in law, to take just two examples, supports this view.

It is precisely this institution--the family--about which so much current social and legal controversy can be found today. Most of the controversy can be traced to the issue of a woman's control: over her own name, her property, and her pregnant body: and adamant women can be found on both sides of these issues, some insisting on the use of Mrs. and the abolition of abortion, others on the use of Ms. and the woman's inviolable right to decide on the fate of a pregnancy. To reduce this conflict to a difference in socialization and values, we believe, trivializes something much more profound. Beneath the fierce debate, we propose, lies the question of personal control over a matter of life and death--which reflects in turn potential conflict between the survival of the individual and the survival of the species. We are, finally, not created equal. As Freud has said, the origins of the differences between the sexes are lost in the evolution of the species: but the consequences are with us in every generation.

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